DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 472 570 UD 035 486

AUTHOR	Jordan, Will J.; Cooper, Robert
TITLE	Cultural Issues Related to High School Reform: Deciphering the Case of Black Males.
INSTITUTION	Center for Research on the Education of Students Placed At Risk, Baltimore, MD.
SPONS AGENCY	Office of Educational Research and Improvement (ED), Washington, DC.
REPORT NO	CRESPAR-R-60
PUB DATE	2002-12-00
NOTE	25p.; Version of a report presented at a Symposium on African American Male Achievement (Washington, DC, December 4, 2000).
CONTRACT	R-117-D40005
AVAILABLE FROM	Publications Department, CRESPAR/Johns Hopkins University, 3003 N. Charles Street, Suite 200, Baltimore, MD 21218. For full text: http://www.csos.jhu.edu.
PUB TYPE	Information Analyses (070)
EDRS PRICE	EDRS Price MF01/PC02 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	*Academic Achievement; *Black Students; *Black Teachers; *Educational Change; Educational Trends; High School Students; *Males; *Social Influences

ABSTRACT

An infusion of federal funding and philanthropic support for high schools has generated an unprecedented number of educational reforms. Still, few initiatives confront the unique conditions facing black males. Despite efforts to reform ineffective schools and foster academic achievement for all students, a lingering gap exists between affluent and poor, as well as white and black, subgroups. This report explores the complexities of these issues. It examines the negative effects of intractable social barriers, such as poverty and ineffective schooling. The report suggests that current trends reflect responsible approaches to reform, but the potential role of black teachers has not been explored. (Contains 56 references.) (SLD)

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Report No. 60 / December 2002

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Deciphering the Case of Black Males

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Report No. 60

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This report was published by the Center for Research on the Education of Students Placed At Risk (CRESPAR), a national research and development center supported by a grant (No. R-117-D40005) from the Office of Educational Research and Improvement (OERI), U.S. Department of Education. The content or opinions expressed herein do not necessarily reflect the views of the Department of Education or any other agency of the U.S. Government. Reports are available from: Publications Department, CRESPAR/Johns Hopkins University; 3003 N. Charles Street, Suite 200; Baltimore MD 21218. An on-line version of this report is available at our web site: *www.csos.jhu.edu.*

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THE CENTER

Every child has the capacity to succeed in school and in life. Yet far too many children fail to meet their potential. Many students, especially those from poor and minority families, are placed at risk by school practices that sort some students into high-quality programs and other students into low-quality education. CRESPAR believes that schools must replace the "sorting paradigm" with a "talent development" model that sets high expectations for all students, and ensures that all students receive a rich and demanding curriculum with appropriate assistance and support.

The mission of the Center for Research on the Education of Students Placed At Risk (CRESPAR) is to conduct the research, development, evaluation, and dissemination needed to transform schooling for students placed at risk. The work of the Center is guided by three central themes—ensuring the success of all students at key development points, building on students' personal and cultural assets, and scaling up effective programs—and conducted through research and development programs in the areas of early and elementary studies; middle and high school studies; school, family, and community partnerships; and systemic supports for school reform, as well as a program of institutional activities.

CRESPAR is organized as a partnership of Johns Hopkins University and Howard University, and supported by the National Institute on the Education of At-Risk Students (At-Risk Institute), one of five institutes created by the Educational Research, Development, Dissemination and Improvement Act of 1994 and located within the Office of Educational Research and Improvement (OERI) at the U.S. Department of Education. The At-Risk Institute supports a range of research and development activities designed to improve the education of students at risk of educational failure because of limited English proficiency, poverty, race, geographic location, or economic disadvantage.

ABSTRACT

An infusion of federal funding and philanthropic support for high schools has sparked an unprecedented number of educational reforms. Still, few initiatives confront the unique conditions facing Black males. Despite efforts to reform ineffective schools and foster academic achievement for all students, a lingering gap exists between affluent and poor, as well as White and Black, subgroups. This report explores the complexities of these issues. We examine the negative effects of intractable social barriers, such as poverty and ineffective schooling. We suggest that current trends reflect responsible approaches to reform, but the potential role of Black teachers has not been fully explored.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The authors would like to thank Dr. Donna Harris for her review of this report. An earlier version of this report was presented at the Symposium on African American Male Achievement on December 4, 2000 at Howard University, Washington, D.C.

INTRODUCTION

In response to unparalleled federal support and public interest, an unprecedented number of high school reform efforts have emerged in recent years. High schools are rapidly emerging as the "next frontier" of education reform. Philanthropic agencies such the Gates Foundation, the Carnegie Foundation, and the Open Society Institute have contributed tens of millions of dollars to innovative programs for reforming American high schools. The recent signing of the *No Child Left Behind* Act of 2001 (P.L. 107-11) is expected to provide the impetus for even future reforms as state education agencies and local districts seek federal funds to broaden the scope of school choice for parents and students. Although *No Child Left Behind* is largely an elementary education law, high schools are also required to meet its challenges and reform, if necessary, to address the needs of adolescents unprepared to do high school-level work. Improving high schools is also immensely important because Americans continue to view education as a primary mechanism for redressing inequalities in social life. In this report, we explore trends in high school reform, paying special attention to the conditions of education for Black male adolescents.

Despite efforts to improve ineffective schools and raise academic achievement, there is a well-documented, lingering achievement gap between affluent and poor students, as well as between White and Black students (Grissmer & Flanagan, 2001; Jencks & Phillips, 1998). Moreover, there is growing evidence that low-socioeconomic students of color are disproportionately taught by less-qualified teachers, and attend deteriorated schools that are racially and socioeconomically isolated (Darling-Hammond, 1997). In the report *What Matters Most: Teaching for America's Future*, Linda Darling-Hammond and her colleagues contend that students enrolled in high-poverty and racially isolated high schools are unlikely to have classroom teachers with certification or college degrees in their teaching fields. Such students, they report, have less than a 50% chance of taking a course with a math or science teacher holding a state-issued license and undergraduate degree in the field he or she teaches (National Commission on Teaching and America's Future, 1996/p. 16).

Because the educational system is the sole compulsory institution in the nation, public elementary and secondary schools must shoulder disproportionate responsibility for ameliorating the negative effects of inequality in society. Thus, the problems of many public schools are not necessarily problems that are caused or cured by the school. They are, instead, rooted in various societal ills such as poverty, social class biases, and institutional racism. Conventional wisdom suggests one of the core purposes of schooling is to embody egalitarian principles such as democracy and the maintenance of an equal opportunity social structure. We believe that an ideal American educational system would be both transformative and reproductive. More specifically, schools should act as a vehicle of social mobility for poor and minority students, while simultaneously helping middle class students

reproduce their social status. Good schools encourage at-risk students to surpass the level of education of their parents to obtain social progress (transformative), while allowing affluent students to at least reach the same level as their parents (reproductive).

To be sure, race/ethnicity, social class, and gender play a role in school success or failure (Ogbu, 1988). Gaps in achievement exist across each of these characteristics. The extant literature, however, suggests that the subgroup having the most persistent lag is Black males (Gibbs; 1988; Irvine, 1990; Polite & Davis, 1999). According to Garibaldi (1992), education statistics consistently reveal that Black males cluster at the bottom of the distribution of virtually every indicator of school failure such as dropping out, absenteeism, suspension and expulsion, and low standardized test scores.

Recent national trends suggest Black and other minority students continue to be disproportionately enrolled in schools in central cities (U.S. Department of Education, 2002). For many Black high school students, this translates into overrepresentation in large, urban comprehensive or "zoned" schools that are in racially isolated and high-poverty areas. Academic achievement and graduation rates at these high schools are often very low in comparison to affluent suburban schools. In the worst cases, less than one quarter of the student body reaches 12th grade on time (Balfanz & Legters, 1998).

In addition, central city districts often have few financial resources, political clout, and social capital among parents and families. In these settings, education is frequently not the only social institution without resources and power. Intergenerational poverty and cyclical racial isolation have had devastating effects on education, public health, employment, and the like (Glasgow, 1980; Wilson, 1987). Central cities are often marred by multiple, overlapping social ills such as violence and crime, unemployment, drug abuse, poor public health, and teenage childbirth. Moreover, central city school districts frequently reproduce social inequality, rather than transforming it by fostering achievement among all students. Unfortunately, as argued by Jencks and his colleagues (1972), the American educational system has historically legitimated inequality to a far greater extent than it has generated true social mobility.

In light of the intractable nature of concentrated poverty, proliferating urbanization and racial isolation, many scholars and educators have summarily concluded that little can be done within the existing educational system to significantly improve the conditions for poor students in general and Black males in particular. Despair about the current conditions of education is at the core of the ongoing school choice debate. As a result, some have advocated for establishing alternatives, such as innovative all-male academies to address the unique needs of Black males and to buffer them from potential pitfalls. Although controversial, several such academies have been created, beginning in the Milwaukee Public

School District and spreading to other districts throughout the nation. The long-term success of Black male academies, however, has not been well established (Narine, 1992).

But how and why did Black males become a segment of our population who are conspicuously at-risk and why does their level of school failure persist? In addition, why have policy and practice responses to the achievement crisis among Black males been ineffective on a large scale?

An "Endangered Species"

The concept of Black adolescent males as endangered is not new. For decades, Black males have been disproportionately at risk of school failure and diminishing life chances. Numerous studies have chronicled the troubled status of Black males in school and in social life. In the mid-1980s, several authors referred to Black males as an "endangered species" for these reasons (Gibbs, 1988; Hare, 1987; Hare & Castenell, 1985). The metaphor was based mainly on the increasing numbers of Black males at risk of school failure and in the criminal justice system, coupled with shrinking numbers of Black males in the higher education pipeline and those who are gainfully employed. Compared to other groups, Blacks males have higher dropout rates, lower standardized achievement scores, higher suspension and expulsion rates, higher infant mortality rates, the highest incarceration rates, and the shortest life expectancy (Gibbs, 1998).

What has been the impact of the experiences of Black males on the development of their identity and self-concept? Whether it is perceived failure in the labor market or in educational pursuits, Black males are socialized to view their self-worth as somewhat less than others (Hare, 1987), and their locus of control as relatively lower (Parrot, 1984). Kunjufu (1986) asserted that the social institution that contributes most flagrantly to the destruction of Black males' aspirations is the public education system. He contended that educational institutions have historically evolved a series of complex features that deny Black males equal access to opportunity. Special education, tracking and ability grouping, and standardized testing are examples of structural educational barriers. In some cases, according to Kunjufu, learning and school engagement gaps between Black males and other groups can be seen as early as the fourth grade. Unfortunately, many Black males never recover from the initial slippage and are relegated to a poor quality education with few chances for upward mobility.

Considering the normative cultural values embedded in the social, political, and economic institutions of our society, Black males have come to resemble an endangered species. The endangered status of Black males results from a combination of institutional racism, the inertia of inter-generational poverty, and an inability to execute and sustain

meaningful educational reform and community development. In the crudest sense, and with the exception of a few who are widely admired, young Black males are largely perceived and stereotyped by one or more of the five Ds: dumb, deprived, dangerous, deviant, and disturbed (Gibbs, 1988). Although these words are seldom spoken or written, they can reflect mainstream cultural values and are often reflected in educational policy and practice.

TRENDS IN HIGH SCHOOL REFORM

For the past decades, terms such as school reform, restructuring, redesign, and improvement have dominated educational discourse regarding possible ways of affecting fundamental changes in the schooling experiences of at-risk students. Research suggests that these initiatives emerged in several waves (Lusi, 1997). The early waves focused directly upon raising standards. Failing schools were often mandated to work harder at doing more of the same. Often, an aspect of these reforms involved replacing the instructional staff and school leaders, with no innovations apart from the traditional models (Petrie, 1990). This approach, however, neglected systemic complexities of the educational enterprise. Thus, reform strategies of this sort were often characterized as piecemeal and disconnected (Cohen & Spillane, 1992; Smith & O'Day, 1990) because they did little more than tinker with an essentially defective system. Such reform efforts left the overall nature of teaching and learning unchanged (Cohen, 1988; Cuban, 1990; Firestone, 1989).

Subsequent waves of reform shifted the focus to the redistribution of management and decision-making, or similarly, authority and accountability (Murphy, 1992). Here, educational reformers sought to decentralize control of curriculum/instruction and management to the local level (Elmore & McLaughlin, 1988). Site-based management and shared decision making are examples of this. A great strength, but also a weakness, of these reforms is that school principals became building managers where they were ultimately held responsible for all aspects of education occurring in their schools. To be successful, principals had to not only perform the duties of instructional leaders but also those of executives, arbitrators, procurement officers, head counselors, and peacekeepers. The goals of these reforms were noble: "to capitalize on the energy and creativity of individuals at the school level" (Murphy, 1992, p. 6). Over time, however, the pendulum swung in the other direction and many school districts restocked their central administrative offices.

"Comprehensive" reform is the most recent wave. This approach has been described as whole-school restructuring aimed at improving the quality of education for at-risk students by altering the deepest organizational structures (Murphy, 1992). Traditional notions of high school structure and functions are ostensibly abandoned in this approach. In addition, the primary function of educational reform is no longer the maintenance of an ineffective,

antiquated organizational infrastructure, but rather the development of innovative and fundamentally different American high schools (Mojkowski & Fleming, 1988).

A review of the literature by Jordan, McPartland, Legters, and Balfanz (2000) identified three main components of comprehensive school reform models in high school: 1) structural, 2) curriculum and instruction, and 3) professional development. Structural reforms refer to policies and strategies aimed at changing the social and/or physical organization of the school. They include initiatives such as career academies, small learning communities, class size reduction, the creation of interdisciplinary teacher teams, and block scheduling. Curriculum and instructional reform refers to attempts to improve the content and delivery of core academic subjects. Examples include innovative ways of teaching math and English, as well as infusing culturally relevant pedagogy and material into academic courses. Finally, ongoing professional development refers to any number of training activities for teachers and school leaders aimed at helping them address changing dynamics of educational processes.

Altering school norms and creating a new culture are important components of comprehensive school reform. In breaking down urban high schools into small learning communities, for example, new patterns of relationships and normative structures emerge. When large, poorly managed schools, overrun by chaos, are restructured into self-contained, small learning communities, expectations for teachers and students are affected. Because smaller schools are easier to manage, chaos becomes order (Lee & Loeb, 2000). It becomes easier for teachers and administrators in smaller environments not only to learn the names of all the students they interact with, but also to know something about what motivates them. Structural changes sometimes help to facilitate a new culture and climate that lead to a warm and caring environment for students within the school. To increase the probability of academic success, however, a school environment conducive to learning must have high academic press (Jordan et al. 2000). "Academic press" refers to motivating students to work hard in school and achieve at high levels.

The *Breaking Ranks* report (National Association of Secondary School Principals, 1996) suggests that numerous challenges face American high schools, regardless of the race/ethnicity, socioeconomic, or cultural characteristics of their students. The report lays out several core themes that are central to any short list of school reform initiatives. These themes, or guiding principles, include the following statements:

- High school is, above all else, a learning community and each school must commit itself to expecting demonstrated academic achievement for every student in accord with standards that can stand up to national scrutiny.

- High school must function as a transitional experience, getting each student ready for the next stage of life, whatever it may be, with the understanding that, ultimately, each person needs to earn a living.
- High school must be a gateway to multiple options.
- High school must prepare each student to be a lifelong learner.
- High school must provide an underpinning for good citizenship and for full participation in the life of a democracy.
- High school must play a role in the personal development of young people as social beings having needs beyond those that are strictly academic.
- High school must lay a foundation for students to be able to participate comfortably in an increasingly technological society.
- High school must equip young people for life in a country and a world in which interdependency will link their destiny to that of others, however different those others may be from them.
- High school must be an institution that unabashedly advocates on behalf of young people.

Each of these principles represents broad ideas or attainable goals for high schools attempting to prepare all adolescents for higher education and adult life, apparently, irrespective of the background characteristics and cultural traditions of the students. We cite excerpts from *Breaking Ranks* not as hard and fast rules that should govern high school reform, but instead as noteworthy beliefs about how schools should work, what appropriate outcomes should be, and what constitutes the basis for promising reform strategies frequently appearing throughout the research and policy literature. While these principles can be seen as common goals of high school reform, they make no specific reference to whether or how racial/ethnic and gender issues influence or alter the implementation process.

Black Teachers and School Reform: Joining Two Debates

The extant educational literature contains a number of policy and practice recommendations for educating Black males that beg an important question: What can be done within the context of school reform to improve the overall achievement and school success for Black male students? While high school reform is gradually taking into account various strategies for improving school structure, curriculum/instruction, and professional development, the issue of race and culture within the context of comprehensive reform has been largely ignored.

The broader issue of how staffing, especially teachers, affects a school's capacity for change has occurred separately from the discourse on comprehensive school reform. In this vein, we argue that if the current wave of high school reform is to make a positive difference in the overall schooling experiences of Black males, an important issue must be addressed—the recruitment of Black male teachers. This issue is rooted in research findings suggesting that race congruence and cultural synchronization may make a difference in motivating Black students to learn.

We have suggested that there is an apparent disconnection between the current discourse on school reform and teacher quality. Recruiting Black teachers has been part of the latter debate, but not the former. Each of these issues, however, are inextricably linked. Yet, in view of teacher shortages and volatile turnover rates, high school reform initiatives are often unable to affect teacher recruitment. Concern is often focused on the implementation of specific practices, such as building small learning communities and using cooperative learning techniques, with less attention being paid to potentially important characteristics of the implementers.

Teacher background characteristics, however, are critical to the success or failure of high school reform. In addition, ascriptive characteristics, such as gender and race/ethnicity, as well as achieved factors, such as certification, education-level, and experience, are important. Several scholars have written about the implications of cultural and social distances between students and teachers (Delpit, 1995; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Rist, 1970). Ray Rist's landmark study of elementary school classrooms illustrated that even in situations where both teachers and students are Black, social class plays a role in how teachers formulate perceptions of their students' ability. Also, although Irvine (1990) suggested that "cultural synchronization" between students and teachers motivates Black students to achieve, this body of research has not sufficiently permeated the prevailing discussions of comprehensive school reform, at least not outside the domain of curriculum and pedagogy.

While researchers have not yet joined the discourse on teacher quality and recruitment with high school reform, and policy makers have not targeted the unique needs of Black males, we believe prevailing models of reform represent a responsible way of improving schools for many at-risk students. There is mounting evidence that student engagement and achievement are positively affected by improvements in school structure, curriculum and teaching, and professional development (Jordan et al., 2000). As ineffective high schools slowly improve, however, the distribution of academic success within the school can be relatively unaffected. In other words, as the school begins to show improvement as a result of reform efforts, the achievement levels by race/ethnic and SES subgroups do not change. Thus, the gap between Black males and other subgroups remains.

To advance research and development on the core principles of comprehensive school reform, we believe, the limits and possibilities of Black male teachers ought to be taken into account. More research is needed to explicate the effects of the recruitment of Black male teachers in high school on the achievement and motivation of Black male students. Empirical evidence on this relationship is lacking, as little scholarly attention has been focused on this subject. We are cognizant of the fact, however, that this issue is controversial. Increasing the number of Black male teachers to address the needs of Black male students can be seen as abandoning the integration ideal of the Civil Rights Movement.

Nevertheless, our assertion is based partly on the cultural synchronization theory, coupled with an understanding that overall teacher quality and effectiveness always trumps racial congruence between students and teachers. That is, effective teachers of any race or ethnic background are preferable—for raising motivation and achievement generally, and particularly among Black male students—to unqualified Black teachers. Having said this, however, Black male teachers seem to have several important advantages in educating Black adolescents. These include strategic use of shared knowledge, modeling appropriate behavior, and in some cases, common social experiences. The rapport Black male teachers can rapidly establish with Black male students through their common cultural heritage can be maintained in the face of social class differences. The value-added dimension of being exposed to good teachers, who are Black males, might be a key factor in the probability of success for some Black male students.

Teacher-Student Cultural Congruence

Several notable scholars have compiled research-based strategies, as well as policy recommendations, for fostering achievement among Black students generally (Delpit, 1995; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Lomotey, 1990; Shujaa, 1996; Willie, Garibaldi, & Reed, 1991). Findings from this body of research, however, have not influenced discussions of school reform to a large extent. Perhaps one of the reasons why is that researchers and policy makers struggle with the implications of culturally relevant teaching and learning. On one hand, the educational research community recognizes that many Black children and adolescents may need potent interventions to succeed in school. Beliefs of this nature often evolve into notions of whole-school reform strategies. Yet, on the other hand, only courageous policy makers, researchers, and practitioners advocate for cultural congruence between students and teachers, or racially/culturally-specific, or targeted, curriculum and instruction. If, for example, exposing Black male students to Black male teachers who can act as role models and establish rapport and credibility with them is shown to be effective in bolstering student motivation, what are the policy implications of this vis-à-vis our current knowledge that, in the real world, very few teachers of Black boys are Black men? Furthermore, what are

potential ramifications of embracing the idea of cultural congruence within the context of a pluralistic society that ostensibly values and celebrates diversity? How would increasing the number of Black male teachers to teach Black male students avoid or reconcile the appearance of advocacy for a return to segregation?

Answers to questions such as these may spawn several controversial research questions because they not only relate to reducing the race gap, but also are embedded in deep-seeded egalitarian values and opinions concerning race relations in the United States.

The discourse on high school reform is occurring apart from new knowledge about cultural relevancy and the education of Black adolescents. Conceivably, this is a result of a widespread philosophy among school reformers that effective education should be culturally neutral. Yet some scholars view the lack of such discourse as benign neglect of the unique cultural needs of Black students in classrooms and schoolhouses. As mentioned earlier, there is evidence that the race and cultural background of teachers do, in fact, play a role in the education of Black students (Delpit, 1995; Irvine, 1990; Ladson-Billings, 1994).

Neglecting the role of culture in educating children and adolescents is somewhat explained by Irvine's notion of "cultural aversion," which she describes as a general reluctance of educators to consider race and race-related issues such as equality, prejudice, discrimination, and social justice. According to Irvine: "This color-blind philosophy is linked to educators' uncomfortableness in discussing race, their lack of knowledge of cultural heritage of their students' peers, and their fears and anxieties that open consideration of differences might incite racial discord or perhaps upset a fragile, often unpredictable, racial harmony" (1990/p. 26). Instead, there is a preference among many researchers, educators, and policy makers to focus on the broad issues pertaining to school reform and improvement, as if they were devoid of cultural implications.

Increasing achievement and school engagement for all students, regardless of racial/ethnic background or gender, have been key to recent waves of school reform, to be sure. Ultimately, the primary aim of educational reform is to affect positive changes in the structure, curriculum and instruction, and professional development of urban high schools. There is a general understanding that at-risk students are culturally and ethnically diverse, as well as disproportionately Black, yet we have not developed adequate policies and practices for taking full advantage of students' cultural histories. While multicultural education and culturally relevant pedagogy/curriculum are steadily penetrating school reform, there is little evidence to date of a significant impact upon the achievement and school success of Black males.

Notwithstanding the lack of studies demonstrating direct effects on standardized achievement levels, there is considerable research documenting and underscoring the

importance of cultural relevancy in the education of Black students and fostering their overall school success (Boykin, 1986; Hopkins, 1997; Irvine, 1990; Ladson-Billings, 1994; and others). As mentioned earlier, a real-world challenge for proponents of multicultural education and cultural relevancy in education, as well as proponents of whole-school reform, is that many reform strategies presume no change in the existing classroom teachers. This assumption is made because effective teachers and school leaders are known to be in short supply and high demand. Moreover, the professional development of teachers around issues of cultural competence is labor-intensive, and rarely successful on a large scale. In addition, as standards for achievement continue to rise as states implement *No Child Left Behind,* schools and districts are, out of necessity, increasingly focusing professional development on subject- or content-specific training, often linked to particular state or national assessments. Future professional development agendas are likely to continue to focus on subject matter, at the expense of topics such as cultural relevancy or rethinking teacher and student interactions. While focusing on core content areas in high school rightfully deserves high priority, it is somewhat uncertain how teachers would have sufficient opportunity for professional development centered on the cultural diversity among their students.

The importance of studying micro-processes, such as specific teacher-student interactions within the classroom and the implications and effects of this interaction on student achievement and engagement, has been long established (Brophy & Good, 1974). Studies addressing issues such as teacher expectancies (Dusek, 1975; Elashoff & Snow, 1971; Entwisle & Hayduk, 1978; Rist, 1970) and cultural synchronization between teachers and students (Irvine, 1990) cast light on how ascriptive factors, such as race/ethnicity, gender, and social class, can influence student learning. However, developing strategies for mitigating the effects of low expectancies, cultural ambivalence, or general misunderstandings between teachers and students can be a complicated and arduous task. In fact, success is often fleeting and difficult to sustain. This is primarily because attempts to change expectancies and cultural sensitivities cut to the core of teachers and other school personnel as individuals, as well as the social conditions that students face in school and in their community. For example, in the case of at-risk Black male students, teacher expectancies are often low because the resources teachers have at their disposal to bring to bear on the multiple problems faced by them are woefully inadequate. Irrespective of what teachers may think about individual Black boys or Black males as a whole, they are keenly aware of the overlapping social, economic, and political barriers to their success. Thus, there is a widespread belief that Black students in general must "beat the odds" if they are to achieve educational success.

The Possibilities and Limits of Black Male Teachers

High school reformers are often asked to assume current staffing resources in attempting to support failing schools. Moreover, struggling schools that serve large percentages of at-risk students tend to have the most difficult time attracting and retaining good teachers (Oakes, 1985, 1986). But in a race-conscious society (such as ours), cultural synchronization can be an important aspect of teaching and learning (Irvine, 1990). Teachers who have shared knowledge and understandings with students can be better equipped to solve students' problems and motivate them to learn.

We believe, however, that increasing the number of Black male teachers alone is not the answer. Instead, we suggest that shared cultural knowledge (endowed as a result of being a member of the same racial and gender group) can provide a value-added dimension of teaching and learning, holding constant a teacher's ability to teach, credentials, and level of experience. Perhaps a wrinkle in this conjecture is that although Black male teachers and Black male students may share common cultural experiences, teachers are virtually, by definition, middle class. Complete cultural congruence or synchronization between Black teachers and Black students almost never exists, and can have possible drawbacks. For example, there are many racially isolated schools having many Black teachers, where Black male students consistently fail. Here, the persistent under-performance of Black males can perhaps be explained by a combination of factors such as inadequate resources, unstable leadership, low teacher quality, and a host of student inputs, such as the intractable conditions brought on by poverty. Thus, although there is a potential for positive influences, recruiting Black male teachers to teach Black male students cannot be viewed as a panacea.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

Many Black male adolescents are placed at risk of educational failure because of a complex array of institutional and socioeconomic factors they face within the schools and communities in which they live. These current social and educational conditions have historical linkages, and, indeed, they are intergenerational. Effective policies and strong interventions are needed to improve the plight of Black males in society. Within a broader framework, it is important to keep in mind that problems that manifest within school are not always school problems per se. Black males are not only disproportionately at risk of school failure, but also at risk of many other negative outcomes, such as infant mortality, poor public health, drug abuse, crime and legal problems, and unemployment (Gibbs, 1988). For this reason, multiple institutions serving Black communities must seek remedies for shrinking the social mobility and achievement gap between Black males and other groups.

We are somewhat optimistic that of the institutions Black males encounter, schools, which are the sole compulsory institutions, appear to be the most malleable to change. Despite the challenges outlined above, high schools can be reformed and improved via policy and leadership that is guided by research and theory.

There is cause for hope that high schools attempting to prepare Black males for adult life can be reformed into more effective organizations succeeding at helping greater numbers achieve academically. The broader aspects of social life are more difficult to assess. There is considerable evidence suggesting communities themselves and other social institutions, such as the criminal justice system and public assistance agencies, are far more resistant to change than public schools. This is most apparent in racially isolated communities where concentrations of poverty have existed for generations. To be sure, the devastating effects of poverty are often intractable, not only for educators, but also for public health, social service, housing, and workforce development agencies.

At the outset, we mentioned that educational institutions must shoulder a disproportionate amount of responsibility for ameliorating inequality in society. American high schools, ideally, should provide both a vehicle of social mobility for at-risk adolescent students, while reproducing academic success (and ultimately social status) for middle class students. Children of school dropouts need desperately to go beyond the attainment level of their parents in order to lead successful adult lives, and children of Ivy League graduates should strive to duplicate their parents' educational accomplishments.

A caveat is that many researchers view educational and social mobility as a zero-sum game (Jencks et al., 1972). Success for one individual reduces the probability of success for another. The institution of education mimics the economy in several respects, including its pyramidal structure, having wide clusters of individuals at the bottom and much fewer at the top (Hare, 1987). Many people earn high school diplomas, a smaller number have college degrees, fewer still earn masters degrees, and a relatively tiny percentage earn doctorates and advanced professional degrees. Similarly, there are many minimum wage workers and few millionaires. Thus, it is difficult to conceive of a truly egalitarian educational system that truly leaves no child behind, without reconceptualizating broader social, economic, and political structures.

Suppose, for example, that there were no school dropouts and that every high school graduate was suddenly qualified to attend college. Assume further that state and federal financial aid for higher education was available for every applicant who requested it, in the amount necessary to cover all costs. Even if this were to happen, we do not have an American higher education infrastructure to support such an influx of new students.

Furthermore, endeavoring to reform schools without simultaneously strengthening their communities is like attempting to filter the air in a room with the windows open (Anyon, 1995). As posited by Waller (1932), the community is the whole and the school is a fragment. However, educational politics, along with complex bureaucracy and institutionalism, causes us to lose sight of the fragmentary nature of schooling in social life. As a result, school reform initiatives are often narrowly focused upon creating more effective schoolhouses, paying little attention to the demographics and cultural backgrounds of the student population.

In the case of Black males, many well-intentioned reform agendas have missed the mark. Many Black males face daunting challenges in school just as they are at risk in the larger spheres of society. It is due, in part, to historical and ongoing inequality in society and institutionalized racism. The criminalization of Black males, such as in racial profiling, disparaging media images as challenged by the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, and the overrepresentation of Black males in state and federal prisons, is inextricably linked to educational at-risk conditions.

The strategies often used in high school reform represent a responsible, but incomplete, approach to addressing the needs of Black male adolescents. Certainly, the overall quality of a school as measured by its structure or organization, curriculum/instruction, and professional development is critical. Also, the quality, effectiveness, and commitment of teachers are paramount issues. But holding these things constant, the cultural issues affecting Black males and the possibilities and limits of bringing in Black male teachers should be given thorough consideration and further study. At this point, the missing components of comprehensive school reform are the lack of attention to the cultural uniqueness of Black males and the relative shortage of Black male teachers.

We end this report with a general recommendation for research and policy. That is, future research and policy ought to involve the recruitment of Black male teachers into the development of school reform initiatives, particularly at critical transition points of schooling. Some combination of new studies analyzing and synthesizing national and state statistics, along with qualitative case studies, would be needed to accomplish this. Ultimately, addressing this charge would involve merging at least two separate bodies of research literature that, thus far, are largely disconnected. Further research and development involving the potential value-added benefits of racial congruence and cultural synchronization for educating Black males would be insightful and may go a long way in refining models of high school reform and improving student outcomes.

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